Why a Social Summit?

WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Copenhagen
Denmark
6-12 March 1995

Attacking Poverty

Building Solidarity

Creating Jobs

To Attack Poverty

More than a billion people live in poverty—without jobs, without basic necessities, without hope. Most are in rural areas of Asia and Africa—although millions more can be found in the cities of the industrialized countries as well as the developing world. How can this condition, which afflicts women in disproportionate ways, be alleviated? How can the poor become productive members of society?

To Build Solidarity

Social inequalities and polarization are deepening. Can intolerance and racism be ended? How can regions torn by ethnic and national differences bring their people together? A theory and practice of social integration is needed, drawn from lessons learned around the world.

To Create Jobs

Jobs have become so scarce in most regions of the world that high unemployment may be turning into a permanent feature of the modern economy, swelling the ranks of the poor and undermining social stability. How can nations create new jobs—and ensure that they are not only plentiful, but productive and satisfying for all?

National leaders and delegations intend to grapple with these questions—and draw up a plan of action to address them—when they meet in March 1995 at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, Denmark.

"This will be the first time in the history of the United Nations, or the League of Nations, in which heads of State and Government will meet in order to deal with social development as a priority issue of the international agenda", said the chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the Summit, Ambassador Juan O. Somavia of Chile.

From the perspective of the United Nations, which is organizing the Summit, the three interrelated problems of poverty, unemployment and social integration share something besides universal concern: the possibility that they can be solved over time through collective international efforts.

"We need an international conference, a summit, so that leaders of the world, public and private institutions and all citizens of goodwill can agree to mobilize their energy and intelligence for the achievement of common goals and the solution to pressing problems", said United Nations Under-Secretary-General Nitin Desai, whose Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development is the home base of the Summit secretariat.

Putting People First

In many ways, Mr. Desai and others say, the Copenhagen meeting represents an opportunity to build on the accomplishments of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development—the so-called Earth Summit. At that Conference, in Rio de Janeiro, more than 150 nations agreed that "human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development".

Earth Summit leaders also concluded that preserving the planet for future generations will require nothing less than the eradication of poverty; appropriate population policies; the elimination of wasteful patterns of consumption; a supportive and open international economic system; and the participation of all concerned citizens—especially women, the young, indigenous peoples and local communities.

The ultimate goal of the Social Summit, Ambassador Somavia declared, is to help make "ordinary people throughout the world feel less insecure, less threatened and more dignified".

"The dignity of the human being is a great endeavour", he said. "It is an ideal well worth fighting for; a fundamental value to orient our life; a moral need for contemporary societies."

Coming in the 50th anniversary year of the United Nations, the 1995 Social Summit will

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occupy a central position in a constellation of other United Nations–organized gatherings on global development issues. These include the 1990 World Summit for Children, the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 International Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, and the upcoming 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and the 1996 UN Conference on Human Settlements.

The world faces a 'social and moral crisis ... of immense proportions'

— Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali

The World Situation

The world has witnessed unprecedented material progress in the last half of the twentieth century. But the benefits of this progress have not been distributed equally. The gulf between the haves and the have-nots has widened dramatically in recent years—between rich and poor nations, and between rich and poor citizens.

The persistence of poverty, exacerbated by increases in world-wide unemployment rates, has raised doubts about the likelihood of continued material progress into the twenty-first century. Combined with the environmental repercussions of unchecked population growth and reckless economic development, a grim picture has taken shape.

"Together with spectacular advances in science and technology in such fields as biology and genetics, the wounds blindly inflicted upon the environment by present systems of production and consumption are causing humankind today to have doubts about its future", said the United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. "This atmosphere of general uncertainty is compounded by a social and moral crisis which, in many societies, is of immense proportions."

Even in the most prosperous nations, the dimensions of this crisis are unmistakable: in developed countries where 1 of every 10 people of working age cannot find a job that pays a living wage, and where the young no longer see the usefulness of education; when tried-and-true social values become suddenly obsolete, and when solidarity between individuals and groups is eroded, replaced by individual or political egoism.

In virtually every region of the world, there is rising insecurity brought on by the effects of crime, substance abuse and drug trafficking.

The Post–Cold War Reality

Although it once seemed a harbinger of peace, the end of the cold war has had a destabilizing effect. Cut adrift from the moorings of bipolar super-Power rivalry, many nations have become caught up in ethnic violence and civil warfare. People seeking better lives in new lands have fallen victim to xenophobically inspired terror.

Developing countries have lost the influence they once wielded as objects of cold war competition — and their leaders contend that they are inadequately represented in decisions on international trade and finance.

Meanwhile, international financial institutions—and a new world trade organization—have assumed larger roles in global affairs. But they have failed to halt economic deterioration in crisis-torn countries, much less distribute equitably the social and financial costs of restoring national economies to health.

"It is evident that with the end of the cold war, a new organizing concept is needed to replace the old order of the struggle against communism on one side and imperialism on the other", Ambassador Somavia said. "Shouldn't the improvement in conditions of life of people and the planet become the new organizing factor of international life?"

The Trend Towards Globalization

Globalization — the growing linkage of economic and political policies, trends, even modes of behaviour and consumer habits—is transforming the evolution of modern society.

The interdependence of economic and financial decisions, often via multinational corporations, has helped fuel a rapid expansion of

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markets. But the benefits are not being apportioned equally, as in the case of developing countries that have not been able to share in globalized foreign investments. New forms of international cooperation must be devised that will make it possible for all to share in the positive aspects of economic globalization.

But the negative aspects of cultural and ethical globalization must also be dealt with. The eagerness of individuals and societies to embrace newly transnational tastes and aspirations—often no more profound than style of dress, food or choice of television programmes —shows how late twentieth century societies can grow by opening their doors to all creations of human intelligence.

But openness can also lead to homogenization, to the loss of traditional values and unique lifestyles—of individuality itself. The loss of intergenerational solidarity, and the bonds that unite communities, can create moral and cultural vacuums—and these vacuums become fertile ground for alienation and delinquent behaviour.

The enhancement of social integration will involve finding ways to reconcile openness and cultural change with pluralism and respect for tradition.

Development as a Common Thread

The Summit's core issues of poverty, unemployment and social integration have been identified by the General Assembly as severe problems of modern society, whose solution is crucially important to sustainable human development. And development is central to the goals of the United Nations.

"Increased international cooperation for economic and social development would significantly contribute to the strengthening of international peace and security", the General Assembly declared in December 1992, in a resolution authorizing the Social Summit.

In another time and context, development —whether social, economic, cultural or sustainable — would have been simply termed human progress or human evolution, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali said. As it is, they are all different facets of a single aim and a single process.

"We must integrate the previously separate concepts of peace and security on the one hand, and social and economic development on the other", the Secretary-General said. "Development must now be seen as part of the task of building a more secure and peaceful world for everyone."

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